



Far Away and Back Again by Gamemakers

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Summary: Nearly two months after Will's disappearance, Hawkins has returned to normal. On the night of the Snow Ball, a friend comes back to fulfill a promise.

Far Away and Back Again

"Let me get this straight. It's Saturday night, your parents aren't home, and you actually want to study."

"Like I told you, I've got a test Monday." Nancy had only just managed to scrape by with an A-minus last semester, and if the upperclassmen were to be believed, second semester chemistry made first semester look like kindergarten. She needed an A on this first exam to have any chance of salvaging her GPA.

"Yeah, I thought you were saying that in case my parents could hear."

Nancy rolled her eyes at that, but then, a thought came to her. She slipped off her slippers and sidled up onto Steve's lap. Her dad's La-Z boy was just big enough for the two of them. "That better?" she asked innocently.

He wrapped his arms around her waist. "That's um... yeah, this is really good."

She rested her cheek against his shoulder, regretting more than a little that she had to study tonight. Mike shouldn't be back from the Snow Ball until at least ten thirty, maybe later if the boys managed to wheedle a late-night trip to McDonald's out of Jonathan when he picked them up. If they worked hard for the next hour, she and Steve might just be able to squeeze in some fun before her brother got home. "Just read me the first definition. It should start with the stuff on stoichiometry, somewhere around January tenth."

Steve flipped through the first few pages of her notebook. "You really numbered all the pages in your notebook and made a table of contents for it?"

"Are you making fun of me right now?"

"No, it's cute. I just didn't realize how anal you were about this kind of stuff. Okay, here we are. What's a catalyst?"

"Something that changes the pace of a reaction but is not directly

involved in the reaction."

Nancy could feel his nod. "Sounds about right. It's regenerated at the end of the reaction. Did you say that?"

"It's close enough." Not really, since that was exactly the kind of thing Kaminsky would pick on when he was grading. She made a mental note to look over that section again tomorrow. "Got another one for me?"

"Yeah. What's the chemical equation for – I have no idea how you say this – tetrachloroethylene?"

Tetra meant four, and chloro was short for chlorine, so it had to be some kind of organic compound with four chlorines, but how would that bond? She'd had a terrible time following that unit in class, so it shouldn't come as any surprise that she didn't know what to do, but Nancy only had two days before the test, and –

A clang came from upstairs, and she went rigid. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah. What was it?"

Nancy didn't know if it was nerves or not, but she could have sworn that the living room light was flickering ever so slightly. She jumped up. "I don't know, but Holly's sleeping up there." She grabbed the poker from the fireplace and dashed upstairs, Steve right behind her. "Stay quiet," she warned as they edged towards the little girl's bedroom. Nancy's grip on the poker tightened as she nudged the door open.

The room looked just as she had left it nearly an hour prior. The window was still closed and latched, Holly's pink teddy bear nightlight still shone from its spot next to her bed, and most importantly, the little girl lay in her toddler bed, thumb in her mouth as she slept. Nancy breathed a sigh of relief. "She's all right?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, she's fine. It was probably just the wind or something. You go check Mike's room, okay? It'd be just like him to leave his window open in January."

"Sure." When he was gone, Nancy gave Holly's room another once-over. Finally satisfied her three-year-old sister was safe, she kissed the top of Holly's head and headed back out into the hallway. "Besides the mess, there's nothing in here," came Steve's voice from the other room.

"Weird," she replied. "I was sure that noise was coming from up here." True, Nancy had done more than her fair share of jumping at shadows these last two months, but if she and Steven had both heard it, the sound at least must have been real, right?

Another sound, this one much softer, came from her room. "Hey, Nancy..."

"Stay behind me," Nancy ordered.

"I'm bigger and stronger than you."

"And I've got the poker." That shut him up. Her heart raced, and forced herself to breathe, counting silently to three before she opened the door. A figure sat on her bed, and Nancy raised the poker, ready to strike.

Halfway through her swing, she saw big, terrified brown eyes, and thank God, strong hands stopped her before she could land the blow. "Shit, Nancy, stop it!" Steve shouted. Her heart almost stopped at the thought of what she had almost done, and had she not grabbed her bedpost to steady herself. Thankfully, Steve able to stay calm. "Hey, don't worry, kid, we aren't going to hurt you." His voice had gone soft as he pried the poker out of her hands and set it down in the opposite corner. "You just scared us is all. We didn't know that anyone was up here."

Eleven - for though she had been missing and presumed dead for almost two months, it had to be Eleven - studied him for a long moment. Nancy took the opportunity to study Eleven. The girl wore the same dress she had when she disappeared, but it was now so ripped and stained that Nancy doubted anyone else would recognize it. Her cheeks had lost none of their hollowness, and though the girl had obviously made some effort to scrub herself clean, Nancy still spotted dirt around her hairline and peeking out around the neckline

of her dress. She had all of Nancy's makeup spread out around her on the bed. "What are you doing, Eleven?" Nancy asked.

"Pretty." The girl always sounded so serious.

"Yes, I can see that. But why are you putting on my makeup?"

"Snow Ball."

At that, everything made sense. "You want to go to the Snow Ball?"

Eleven nodded.

"The Snow Ball usually ends at ten, right?" Steve asked. "It's almost nine. We're gonna have to book it if we want to get there before it ends."

"Well then, I suppose we should get started. You drove over here, right?" Steve nodded. "Give me a few minutes to get her ready, and then you can drop her off. That sound good?" she asked Eleven, and the girl responded with a shy nod. "All right then. Let's see if any of my dresses will fit you. That's not really the kind of thing girls wear to dances."

Being dead for almost a week had its advantages. People realized just how much they liked you, and some of those people were girls. And that was how Will Byers, who as far as Mike knew, had only ever talked to girls when his schoolwork required it, ended up landing a date to the Snow Ball with the prettiest girl in the grade while all of his friends went by themselves.

The dance had sounded kind of magical to him at one point, but now that he was here, Mike couldn't see what the big deal was about it. The organizers had put up a few streamers and a disco ball, but the gym was still the gym. Maybe thirty or forty couples danced, but at least half of the attendees sat around the perimeter of the gym, talking to their friends, trying not to look too jealous, and being bored out of their minds. After Eleven disappeared, Mike hadn't wanted to come, but his mom said it would be good for him to get out of the house and spend some time with kids that weren't Lucas,

Dustin, and Will. She said he would regret it when he was older if he didn't take advantage of these opportunities, and he had been stupid enough to believe her. All he would miss if he hadn't come was wearing his most uncomfortable clothes and having his butt hurt from sitting on the tile floor for almost two hours. They had been relegated to the worst spot in the gym, right next to the exit doors where the cold air from outside seeped in.

"How long until this ends?" Lucas moaned.

"You can see the clock as well as the rest of us," answered Dustin.

"We should at least find somewhere warmer to sit. My butt's going to freeze off."

"If you can find a better place, then we'll move." Dustin turned to him. "Hey, Mike, think we'll be able to talk Jonathan into taking us to McDonald's after this is over?"

He shrugged and continued rubbing away at a stain on the ground next to him. "I brought a dollar to get something," Dustin added, his lisp grating on Mike's nerves in a way it rarely did.

Mike had two dollars in his pocket that his father had given him earlier that day. He'd said they were for getting into the dance in case the ticket cost more than Mike remembered. Mike knew that really meant it was for a treat at McDonald's for him and Will if they all went there after the dance. Even french fries and ice cream didn't sound very good right now.

"Mike." Lucas elbowed him in the ribs, and Mike glared at him. "Mike, look!" He nodded towards the center of the gym.

His throat went dry. There she was, wandering through the room in wide-eyed wonder. Her hair had grown out somewhat, and she had put little clips in it that reflected the light from the disco ball. She wore a purple dress that Mike thought might be Nancy's from homecoming, and though it didn't fit her very well, she absolutely glowed in it.

Finally, he rediscovered his ability to speak. "Elle!" Mike stood up.

"Elle!"

Their eyes met, and she hurried over to them. The two of them looked at each other for a long moment, neither sure what to say, before she pulled him into a hug. He wrapped his arms around her thin body and rested his head against her shoulder while she did the same to him. Mike could hear someone jeering at them, but right now, none of that mattered.

When they had to pull away, she smiled at him. "Snow Ball."

He nodded. "Yeah, we're at the Snow Ball."

"Promise." Mike couldn't help his smile at that. Only then did he remember why exactly people went to this thing. "So, um, do you want to dance?" No matter how terrified he was by that particular prospect, it was good manners to ask.

To his relief, Eleven shook her head, then grabbed his hand and moved towards the wall. When she sat down, Lucas and Dustin joined them.

Lucas hugged her against his side, and she returned the gesture "Elle! Where have you been? We were worried about you. Are you okay?"

"Gone."

"Do you need to go to the doctor or anything? Can you go to doctors now? Where are you staying?" Dustin would always be the reasonable, logical one of the group.

Eleven smiled at him, and her grip on Mike's hand tightened. "Home."